

SHOULD SCHOOLS BE CONDUCTING LOCKDOWN DRILLS?

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Mass shootings in schools, including the 2012 attack at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and the 2018 attack at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, prompt calls for improved safety and security practices to help prevent future attacks or, in the event that one occurs, minimize the loss of life. Following the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, lockdown drills were introduced as a response strategy for educational institutions faced with a similar situation. Today, 95 percent of U.S. schools perform lockdown drills as part of their emergency response plans each year (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018), though the number required varies by state.¹

Recently, calls to end these practices have been raised by Everytown for Gun Safety (2020) in a joint statement with the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, as well as by former presidential candidate Andrew Yang (n.d.) and others. The question of whether to end the practice of lockdown drills, however, should be decided based on evidence rather than emotion. Accordingly, this research brief summarizes arguments for and against lockdown drills, as well as

available research and best practices, to provide better context to answer such a question.

Concerns Over Drills

Much of the concern over lockdowns follows news reports of school drills including activities that have raised issues concerning the safety and psychological well-being of students, faculty, and staff. For example, Indiana teachers were shot with plastic pellets during one training exercise (Zraick, 2019). High school students in Ohio were exposed to sounds of simulated gunfire (Richter, 2019). Other schools have used fake blood and crisis actors to make the exercises seem more realistic for participants (Aronowitz, 2014; Pierpoint, 2019). In some instances, students even have been injured during such drills (Schell, 2019).

Advocates calling for an end to these practices often focus their arguments on two key points. The first is that lockdown drills are traumatizing students (e.g., Everytown for Gun Safety, 2020). Advocates making this argument often focus on stories of these drills going wrong, or point to the daily prevalence of students facing lockdowns (e.g., Rich & Cox, 2018), but do not cite peer-reviewed research studies to back claims that

such experiences are traumatizing. The other main argument raised by advocates is that by teaching students how to respond to active shooters, schools are also training potential assailants because a considerable proportion of school-shooting perpetrators are themselves students (Wilkie, 2019). Such an argument, however, fails to acknowledge the efficacy of a locked door — the number-one lifesaver in school shootings, and a major focus of lockdown drills (Martaindale et al., 2017; Sandy Hook Advisory Commission, 2015). Locked doors can be highly effective in stopping perpetrators, as even an assailant who knows that people are securing their classrooms would be unlikely to be able to breach a locked door before law enforcement arrives (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2019).

Adding to the Confusion

Further confusing the debate over lockdown drills is a consistent muddling of terminology. Lockdown drills and active shooter drills are typically discussed as if they were one and the same. In reality, the term “active shooter” refers to “one or more individuals actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area” (Federal Bureau of Investigation,

1 For example, New York State requires schools to conduct four lockdown drills annually (New York State Education Law, Title 1, Article 17 § 807).

2019, p. 2). In practices for responding to such situations, individuals often are taught to run, hide, or fight (see, for example, Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA], 2018; Ready.gov, n.d.). Lockdowns, on the other hand, are used when there is *any* active threat inside a school or other location (Keyes & Deffner, 2015). Drills preparing for lockdowns teach people to lock the doors, turn off the lights, move out of the line of sight of the corridor window, and maintain silence until the situation is resolved by law enforcement (Keyes & Deffner, 2015; Rygg, 2015).

Another complicating aspect of the terminology is that drills often are confused with exercises. Drills typically are performed by single entities, such as schools, to test a specific procedure or function (FEMA, 2020). Such practices have been commonplace in schools since the “duck-and-cover” drills of the 1950s that were designed to teach and test procedures for use in the event of a nuclear bomb explosion (Pruitt, 2019). Since then, drills have been added for fires (Carella, 2008) and natural disasters such as tornadoes (Hoekstra, Nichols, & Gruntfest, 2014) and earthquakes (Simpson, 2002). Exercises, on the other hand, involve multiple agencies and involve testing the internal capabilities of each group as well as their interagency cooperation (FEMA, 2020). Exercises take considerably more planning and may be costly to implement, whereas drills can easily be incorporated into the daily operations of schools and often require less in the way of financial resources (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2017).

Researching Lockdown Drills

Despite the widespread use of lockdown drills, research on the impact of such practices is sparse. A handful of studies have evaluated various facets of lockdown drills broadly (e.g., for perceptions of safety and/or preparedness, see Baer et al., 2014; Perkins, 2018; Huskey & Connell, 2020; and Peterson et al., 2015; for the effectiveness of drills on response, see Jonson et al., 2018), but few have examined the direct impact of these practices on students. Zhe and Nickerson (2007) found that students who went through lockdown training and then participated in a lockdown drill retained knowledge about how to respond without inducing anxiety or significantly changing their perceptions of school safety. Dickson and Vargo (2017) found that several sessions of behavior skills training (which included instruction, modeling of skills, and practice of those skills) in a lockdown drill resulted in kindergarten students’ mastery of six out of seven steps in the lockdown process.

More recently, Schildkraut and colleagues (2020) found that participating in lockdown drills and training improved feelings of preparedness, with students reporting a greater familiarity with how to respond when lockdowns and other emergency calls are made (e.g., calls to lock down, evacuate, shelter, or hold-in-place). Student perceptions of safety decreased over time, though other factors, including exposure to community-based violence, may have contributed to the decline (Schildkraut et al., 2020). Still, the decline was small, particularly in comparison to the gains made in feelings of preparedness. In a follow-up study, Schildkraut and

Nickerson (2020) found not only that student perceptions of preparedness increased after training and follow-up practice, but also that similar attitudes improved among faculty, staff, and administrative participants. Moreover, following the training, skill mastery was achieved for three out of four steps in the lockdown practice: locking doors, turning off lights, and not responding to door knocks; consistent with other studies, near-mastery was achieved for remaining silent and out of sight (Schildkraut & Nickerson, 2020). So, although more research on lockdown drills is needed, there is some early evidence to suggest that these practices do not unduly traumatize youth and do help in preparing students and staff for emergencies.

Best Practices for Lockdown Drills

Despite the limited research, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has offered guidance around best practices for conducting lockdown drills. NASP (2017) recommends, for example, that drills be carefully planned and that a school safety team be involved in such preparations. Similarly, NASP (2017) recommends giving consideration to the needs of students with disabilities or mental health concerns who may be impacted by participating in a drill. Moreover, drills should never be unannounced, and participants should be debriefed at the conclusion (NASP, 2017). In a later guidance document, NASP (2018) recommends trauma mitigation during actual emergencies (real lockdowns), which can be incorporated into the drill phase to ensure such practices are put into place when needed. Such mitigation includes providing clear information and

directions, maintaining a controlled response to keep students calm, and evaluating the lockdown itself to identify opportunities for improvement or needed resources.

Conclusion

Since the Parkland massacre and other school shootings, school districts have faced the daunting task of ensuring they have plans in place to avoid similar tragedies from occurring and to help mitigate the loss of life if one were to take place. Such events highlight the need for a layered approach to emergency preparedness that involves not only student drills but also threat assessment teams, robust emergency management plans, and internal door locks. Media coverage of “realistic” active shooter training has led to all drills coming under increased scrutiny for their potentially traumatizing effects on students. Yet, many jurisdictions mandate lockdown drills, leaving districts to figure out how best to balance these directives with the needs of those who participate

in such practices. Although state and local statutes should be specific in defining the parameters of the drills being required, few statutes currently are very specific.

In this challenging context, school districts need to distinguish between lockdown drills and active shooter exercises. Lockdown drills are easily incorporated into the school day and can help prepare for any active threat, whereas active shooter exercises require considerable planning and may be costly to implement. Schools and districts should carefully consider whether a lockdown drill, without inducing trauma, can help prepare their students better than a highly realistic, unannounced exercise.

Thorough emergency response plans and greater clarity in current mandates are needed, as well as more research to better understand the best ways to ensure students are safe both from threats and from trauma. The field will benefit from carefully designed studies that aim to answer the following kinds of questions:

1. What are the long-term effects of lockdown drills on students, faculty, and staff?
2. To what extent can specific lockdown procedures and practices be identified that maximize skill mastery and minimize trauma?
3. What are the key mechanisms to standardize and specify lockdown drill parameters for districts and schools?
4. How can districts and schools develop thorough emergency response plans, and how do lockdown drills best fit within such plans?

By answering such questions through rigorous research, the field can develop a more holistic understanding of the effects of and best practices for lockdown drills in school communities.

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